

A Collection of Tasks for English Education

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A Collection of Tasks for English Education

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Abstract

This paper begins by giving a brief outline of task-based language teaching and a definition of a task. This is then followed by descriptions of tasks that may be used in an English as a foreign language classroom. Finally, the authors describe an approach to teaching which combines the traditional process of “present practice produce” and task-based language teaching to bring about a more efficient lesson structure.

Key words : language teaching practice, present practice produce, task, task-based language teaching

Introduction

In recent years, there has been much attention focused on task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the benefits this approach brings to the foreign language classroom. Although the works of, for example, Long (1985) , Prabhu (1987) , and Candlin and Murphy (1987) were often recognized at the onset of this approach to teaching, Ellis (e.g., 2003, 2009) has primarily been seen as the leader of research in TBLT over the past two decades. TBLT focuses on the foundation that “language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner’s natural learning capacity can be nurtured rather than making a systematic approach to teach the language bit by bit” (Ellis, 2009, p. 222) . This idea goes against the traditional approach to teaching, in which teachers and students concentrated on grammatical accuracy rather than on being able to communicate one’s message regardless of how correctly the words in that message were produced. TBLT calls upon teachers to use tasks in order to get students using

the language as much as possible. Through the use of these tasks, it is believed that students will make steady progress in their language studies. There has, however, been much confusion in the past surrounding the definition of a task and how it differs from a regular activity.

Definition of a Task

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and language education, tasks can be differentiated from exercises and drills. Whereas exercises and drills are often used to focus students’ attention on a particular grammatical structure or language function, tasks encourage students to use the target language to convey a message or solve a problem. Ellis (2009) provides four criteria that an activity must follow in order for it to be deemed a task from a TBLT perspective. A task must:

- 1)direct students’ attention to meaning rather than grammatical accuracy;
- 2)include missing information that students need to discover;

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- 3) allow students to call upon their knowledge and skills in the target language; and
- 4) have an outcome that goes beyond just practicing the language (e.g., solving a problem) .

As argued by Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) , researchers and language instructors need “to have clarity about the definition of task that applies in different circumstances” (p. 12) . Likewise, Ellis (2009) emphasized that although tasks generally do not focus on some target language structure or function, they can be designed to do so as long as they satisfy the four guidelines mentioned above. Therefore, Ellis (2009) continues, tasks can be distinguished into *focused tasks*, which are concentrated around having students communicate using a particular target structure, and unfocused tasks, which have students use the target language without any specific target structure in mind. It should be noted that when using focused tasks, students do not need to be explicitly taught the linguistic structure. It is essential, however, that both focused and unfocused tasks need to be designed to satisfy the four guidelines mentioned above in order to be validated as a task.

In English expression and communication classes taught at Japanese elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools, students should be given ample opportunities to use the language that is being taught. This paper shall now provide examples of tasks that can be used in the language classroom and discuss each one briefly as to how they satisfy Ellis’ (2009) guidelines.

Tasks for English Education

Exploring Kyoto

In this unfocused task, students are given the objective of planning a day out in Kyoto for their classmates. In groups of three, students are each given profiles with lists of things that each person wants to see or do while staying in Kyoto. However, each profile the students receive contains different

missing information. Moreover, some activities are only available at certain times throughout the day, so students must work together to create the best plan for their classmates. There are no incorrect answers, and there is no one correct answer, but students should be able to justify why their plans are suitable for their classmates whose profiles they received.

Attention to meaning.

Because students will be required to use various linguistic structures (e.g., giving directions, organizing time schedules, and calculating expenses) in this task, their attention will be focused towards the meaning of what the other members of the group are saying rather than the grammatical accuracy of their utterances.

Missing information.

In addition to students being given information that others in the group do not possess, students also have information missing from their profiles (e.g., places classmates want to see, food/drink classmates want to try) . With the visual input of a map, students are given both shared and split information. The students are required to communicate with each other in this task to fill in the gaps in their information profiles. They must work together in order to create the most appropriate plan for their classmates.

Knowledge and skills.

With there being a variety of linguistic functions required in this task (e.g., expressing time; giving directions) , students will need to call upon previously learned language skills as well as structures and functions that they may not have yet learned in order to successfully complete the task and create appropriate plans.

Outcome beyond practicing language.

The final goal of the task is to create the most enjoyable plan for a trip to Kyoto for their

classmates. Although the use of English is required to complete the task, the grammatical accuracy of their speech does not have a significant effect on the ability to reach the goal of the task.

Staying in a Japanese Inn

In this focused task, students are required to view a floor plan of a Japanese inn. In pairs, students should describe what classmates are doing in what room. Each classmate is performing a different action which the student can use to describe and have the other student identify the room. On Student A's worksheet (See Figure 1), there are assigned rooms A, C, and E to describe and have student B identify. On Student B's worksheet (See Figure 2), they will have rooms B, D, and F to describe and have Student A identify. In this task, students are expected to utilize language for expressing present progressive tense. There may also be a potential for the use of passive voice.

Attention to meaning.

Even though there is more structure to the language which we expect the students to use in this task (i.e., present-progressive), students can still be expected to use a wider variety of expressions and vocabulary in order to convey the intended meaning to their partners rather than focus on the grammatical accuracy of their utterances.

Missing information.

Students are given shared information in the form of a blueprint or layout of the inn and must communicate in order to complete the task. Student A must listen to the room descriptions of Student B in order to identify the letter of the room. Students cannot identify the rooms without first listening to the descriptions of the other student.

Knowledge and skills.

With there being a variety of linguistic functions required in this task, such as describing actions

and potential use of passive voice, students will be required to call upon learned language and vocabulary, as well as structures and functions that they may not necessarily have learned in order to complete the task successfully.

Outcome beyond practicing language.

The final goal of the task is for students to locate what room their classmates are in. Although a more structured use of English is required to complete the task, the grammatical accuracy of their speech does not have a significant effect on the ability to reach the goal of the task, but may instead rely on students to have a more comprehensive knowledge of vocabulary.

STUDENT A

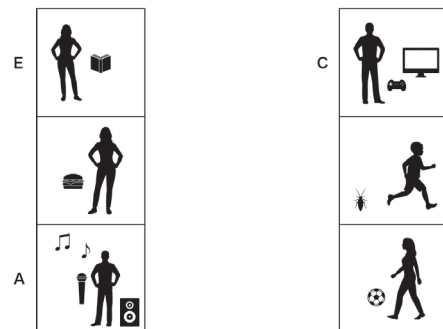


Figure 1. The worksheet used by Student A in the Staying in a Japanese Inn task.

STUDENT B

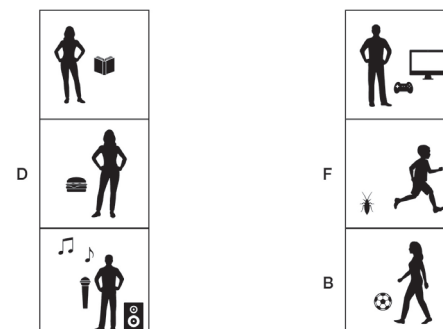


Figure 2. The worksheet used by Student B in the Staying in a Japanese Inn task.

Visit Umekouji Park (Kyoto)

In this focused task, students work in pairs and are each given one of two pictures of Umekouji Park (See Figure 3 and Figure 4). Through describing the pictures to each other, they will find that there are some discrepancies between the two pictures. Students must try to identify all the differences within a set time frame. Students may find differences in, for example, numbers of items, actions, directions, and positions. In this task, students are expected to utilize language for expressing direction, preposition of place, and relative clauses.

Attention to meaning.

Rather than focus on the grammatical accuracy of their utterances, students should focus more on meaning and use a variety of expressions in order to describe their pictures to their partners precisely. While some importance is still placed on grammatical accuracy to describe the location of some items, for example, students would have to make use of prepositions correctly, this should not be the main focus of the activity.

Missing information.

Missing information in this task comes in the form of discrepancies between the pictures which the students must describe in order to identify the differences. Some of the discrepancies include differences in numbers, actions, directions, and positions. Students may quickly notice, for example, that there is no difference in the number of apples on the tree, but in order to realize there is a difference in position, either student would have to describe the positions of the apples to the other student.

Knowledge and skills.

This task requires students to use prepositions of place (e.g., in, on, by, under), but also requires students to call upon previously learned vocabulary (e.g., bees, turtle, mountain, running, swimming) and potentially unlearned structures (e.g., the man is

facing right, the man is running left).

Outcome beyond practicing language.

The main objective of this task is for the students to identify as many differences between the two pictures as possible within the set time frame. How many differences the students will find depends on the students' ability to describe number, actions, directions, and positions. However, the final objective is for students to have the highest number of identified differences, not to necessarily produce grammatically accurate utterances in English.

STUDENT A



Figure 3. The worksheet used by Student A in the Visit Umekouji Park task.

STUDENT B



Figure 4. The worksheet used by Student B in the Visit Umekouji Park task.

Picture whispers

Showing similarities to the Telephone Game, Picture Whispers is a focused task that requires students to work in groups to convey a message. Students sit in rows of four or five. The students in

the front row are shown a picture (e.g., see Figure 5) and are required to describe the picture to the person in their group sitting in the second row. The second students describe the information they heard to the third students, and so on until the last students hear the information and are then required to draw the picture being described. The students sitting in the first row are allowed to go back and look at the picture as many times as they like in order to pass along more details about the picture. This also allows all students to be active throughout the entire task, unlike the traditional Telephone Game, in which students are simply shown a sentence and once they have told the sentence to the next person, do not do anything until the end of the activity. See Leis (2014) for more on the Picture Whispers task.



Figure 5. An example of a picture used in the Picture Whispers task.

Attention to meaning.

Even though Picture Whispers is a focused task concentrating on prepositions of place, greater importance is placed on meaning as the final objective is to recreate the picture being seen by the students in the front row. Accuracy is still, however, necessary in order for the students sitting in the final row to accurately draw the picture.

Missing information.

The Picture Whispers task fulfills the missing information precept of a task as only the student

sitting in the front row can see the picture. Other students in the group are not able to see the picture but need to rely on the information given by the first student to successfully complete the task (i.e., draw the picture as accurately as possible) .

Knowledge and skills.

This task requires students to use prepositions of place (e.g., in, on, under) , but also requires students to call upon previously learned vocabulary (e.g., bench, background, flag) .

Outcome beyond practicing language.

The objective of the Picture Whispers task is for the final student to draw the picture as accurately as possible based on the descriptions passed on by his or her group members. How successful students will be will depend on the accuracy of descriptions given by group members, but the final objective is to draw the picture, not to speak grammatically perfect English. Thus, the Picture Whispers task satisfies this guideline.

Information gap

An information gap is a classic example of a task. Depending on how the information task is designed, it can be a focused task or an unfocused task. Students are put into pairs or groups of three. Each student is given an information sheet—let us call them Card A and Card B (and Card C for groups of three) . On each card, there will be some information given and some information missing. The information given and missing for each card will be different. Students are required to communicate with each other to fill in the information that is given. Finally, based on the information students have shared to complete the cards, students are required to answer a final question or solve some problem which could not be done if they did not have all of the information. It should be noted that in the information gap task described here, the final question is “Who is the best dating partner for whom?” See Figure 6 for an

example of an information gap task for two students and Figure 7 for an example of the same task but in the case when there are groups of three people. The authors highly recommend teachers prepare cards that can be used in either pairs (Figure 6 and Figure 7) or groups of three (Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure

10) so all students will be able to participate actively in the task (i.e., if two students in a group of three hold the same card—say Card B—it is highly likely that one of those students will contribute less than the other student) .







Card A						
Name	Rhonda	Samantha	Terri	Andrew	Bradley	Charles
Age	27		21		29	
Hobby	playing tennis		traveling		cooking	
Occupation	company president		personal trainer		writer	
Pets	cat		two dogs		three mice	
Other information	wine expert		represents contry in squash		fluent in Italian and Spanish	
Best partner?						

Figure 6. The worksheet used by Student A in a group of two in an information gap task.







Card B						
Name	Rhonda	Samantha	Terri	Andrew	Bradley	Charles
Age		34		24		28
Hobby		rock climbing		playing video games		triathlons
Occupation		scientist		English teacher		hairdresser
Pets		tropical fish		lizard		no pets
Other information		loves working in her garden		cannot drink alcohol		allergic to animal hair
Best partner?						

Figure 7. The worksheet used by Student B in a group of two in an information gap task.







Card A						
Name	Rhonda	Samantha	Terri	Andrew	Bradley	Charles
Age	27		21			
Hobby	playing tennis		traveling			
Occupation	company president		personal trainer			
Pets	cat		two dogs			
Other information	wine expert		represents contry in squash			
Best partner?						

Figure 8. The worksheet used by Student A in a group of three in an information gap task.







Card B						
Name	Rhonda	Samantha	Terri	Andrew	Bradley	Charles
Age				24		28
Hobby				playing video games		triathlons
Occupation				English teacher		hairdresser
Pets				lizard		no pets
Other information				cannot drink alcohol		allergic to animal hair
Best partner?						

Figure 9. The worksheet used by Student B in a group of three in an information gap task.







Card C						
Name	Rhonda	Samantha	Terri	Andrew	Bradley	Charles
Age		34			29	
Hobby		rock climbing			cooking	
Occupation		scientist			writer	
Pets		tropical fish			three mice	
Other information		loves working in her garden			fluent in Italian and Spanish	
Best partner?						

Figure 10. The worksheet used by Student C in a group of three in an information gap task.

Attention to meaning.

Although an information gap task can be created as a focused task, the one described in this paper is unfocused and encourages students to consider the meaning of the information being shared to complete the final question (i.e., Who is the best partner for each person on the card?) Even if the information is shared using the incorrect grammar, the message will still be understood and final question can be answered.

Missing information.

The missing-information aspect of a task is evident in the information gap task. The student holding Card A in Figure 6, for example, needs to find out the age, hobby, occupation, details about pets, and any other information for Samantha, Andrew, and Charles. Without this information, this student will be unable to discuss the final question.

Knowledge and skills.

Although, as mentioned above, the information gap task described here is an unfocused task, there are many opportunities for students to practice the be verb (i.e., “Rhonda is 27 years old.”; “Bradley is a writer.”) and third-person s (i.e., “Charles has no pets.”; “Andrew likes playing video games.”). However, students will also be required to use other linguistic structures (i.e., “What other information do you have about Rhonda?”; “I think Terri should go on a date with Charles because they are both active people.”).

Outcome beyond practicing language.

Information gap tasks are quite popular among language teachers. However, many of these tasks seem to lack the final objective of using the information students have learned in order to solve a problem. In the task shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7, the final objective is to discuss who should go on a date with whom. This outcome is not directly related to improving their language skills, but students

would have had to use their language skills in order to find the information they needed to come up with a solution. It should be noted that in the information gap task described in this paper, there is no one correct answer and no incorrect answer. It has been designed so there is no clear answer, and students will be encouraged to share their opinions and ideas about the best solution. (e.g., “I disagree. Charles is allergic to animal hair, and Terri has two dogs. Maybe this will cause some problems for them.”) Other similar tasks can be conducted to, for example, solve crimes (i.e., descriptions of people), decide on what to cook for dinner (i.e., countable and non-countable nouns), buy presents (i.e., people’s hobbies and interests), and finding places in a town (i.e., directions).

Dictogloss

Based on the work of Wajnryb (1990), a dictogloss task requires students to take notes while listening to a passage read at natural speed. Then, in groups of around four members, students share their notes and attempt to reconstruct the passage they had heard. Generally, the dictogloss task follows a structure of:

- 1) pre-listening discussion;
- 2) listening to the passage;
- 3) reconstruction in groups;
- 4) listening to the passage again;
- 5) reconstruction in groups; and
- 6) finally checking the answers.

Once this procedure has been completed, follow-up tasks related to the topic and content of the passage are often conducted. (See Cooke & Leis, 2018 for more on the dictogloss procedure and Leis & Cooke 2019a, 2019b for a collection of dictogloss passages and tasks to use in the classroom.)

Attention to meaning.

The dictogloss task can be created as a focused task, but often will be used as an unfocused task. The goal is not necessarily to get the passage perfectly

reconstructed, but to aim for around 80 percent. The final objective of the dictogloss (see below) is to conduct roleplays and discussions based on the topic and content of the dictogloss passage. Therefore, the meaning acts as a schemata-building task to progress to more active discussions and roleplays in the latter part of the lesson.

Missing information.

In a dictogloss task, students will usually be provided with the first five words of the passage. However, the remaining words need to be reconstructed based on what students heard while listening. Students need to complete as much of the missing information as possible while discussing the content in their groups.

Knowledge and skills.

As mentioned above, when reconstructing the passage, students will be referring to the notes they took while listening. However, even when using bottom-up listening processes, it is not possible to catch every single word that has been uttered, especially when the passage is being read at a natural pace, as is the requirement in a dictogloss task. To reconstruct the passage as accurately as possible, students will need to use their previously learned language skills to guess words they had not been able to hear while listening. As a result, conversations between students, such as the following, can often be heard during students' discussions:

Student A: "Okay, so it starts *A rainbow is arc with seven colors that form in the sky.*"

Student B: "Yes, but I think *arc* is a countable noun, so we need *a* or *the* before, right? I guess *a*."

Student C: "That's right, but *arc* starts with a vowel sound, so it should be *an*."

Student D: "And I think *form* is referring to the singular *rainbow*, not the *colors*, so maybe *form* should be *forms*. But I'm not really sure about that."

Outcome beyond practicing language.

The final objective of the dictogloss task is to reconstruct the passage as closely to the original as possible. Once the task has been completed, teachers will be able to have students participate in active discussions and roleplays based on the topic of the dictogloss and information within.

TPPT

Enthusiasts of the more traditional teaching structure of present-practice-produce (PPP) have displayed concerns about some aspects of TBLT (see, for example, Sheen, 2004; Swan, 2005; Widdowson, 2003). Much criticism has also come from the Asian EFL context, in which grammar instruction is given much importance due to the rigorous testing procedures students are required to go through in order to enter university (See, for example, Butler, 2005; Sato, 2010). Critics of using TBLT in the Asian context suggest that the lack of explicit instruction of grammar will lead to students being confused and causing misunderstandings.

Leis and Erickson (2019) suggest an approach to teaching that combines the TBLT and PPP approaches. Leis and Erickson suggest starting the lesson with a simple, focused task, but that students are not aware of the grammatical structure that will be taught in that lesson. This can then be followed by an explicit grammatical explanation which is based on the points teachers noticed that students were struggling with during the initial task. The third stage of the lesson would have students practice the grammatical structure through meaningful drills or pattern practice conducted in pairs. Finally, the lesson would conclude with another task, which is related to the first task but more cognitively demanding for students. For example, if a lesson were focusing on prepositions of place (e.g., on, under, next to), the lesson might begin with a find-the-difference task as explained above (see the Visit Umekouji Park task) and finish with the Picture

Whispers task.

Leis and Erickson (2019) argued that the task-present-practice-task (TPPT) would allow teachers to focus on the weaknesses student have with the grammatical structures in their explanations during the “present” stage of the lesson and even more during the “practice time.” This, in turn, will allow for more efficient use of lesson time and effective learning, especially in the Asian context in which grammatical accuracy of language is given much importance. Although more research into the TPPT teaching approach is necessary, it is thought that this lesson structure will bring about not only better learning environments but more highly motivated students.

Conclusion

The use of tasks in the language classroom has become increasingly popular in recent years. However, there are still numerous misunderstandings regarding the definition of a task and how to implement one in the classroom. In this paper, the authors have described tasks from the perspective of Ellis (2009) and followed four guidelines which language tasks should follow: putting attention on meaning, involving some missing information, using students’ knowledge and skills, and having outcomes beyond simply practicing the language. Through the tasks we have shared in this paper, we hope language teachers will have a clearer understanding of the purpose of using tasks in their classrooms, resulting in more enjoyable learning for students and teachers alike.

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